

Review of *Dear Science and Other Stories* by Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press)

by Jade How and Gada Mahrouse | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

ABSTRACT With *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick does the work of liberation and enacts new ways of being. Building on her previous studies, this collection engages in a story-sharing, collaborative praxis that emerges from a “black sense of place.” McKittrick’s Black and anti-colonial methodologies are “rebellious,” “relational, intertextual, and interdisciplinary”—thereby “breaching” the “recursive,” “self-replicating” logics of “our present order of knowledge” (44, 2, 23, 163). *Dear Science* invents, reinvents, and reimagines “being human as praxis” through an aesthetic practice of deciphering theoretical texts, photographs, sounds, dance, and song (159). Illustrating her commitment to Black intellectual life, McKittrick writes, listens, and feels in communion with other creatives. In so doing, McKittrick skillfully bursts open the gatekeeping conventions that limit thought, and challenges readers to question what they think they know.

KEYWORDS Black studies, colonialism, science, methodology, biocentricity, relationality, space

Dear Science and Other Stories. By Katherine McKittrick. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 240 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478011040. US List: \$24.95

Katherine McKittrick’s *Dear Science and Other Stories* is an invitation to think and feel *outside* of our delimiting biocentric system of knowledge. This collection of stories and photographs theoretically/visually/sonically interrupts academic conventions with an interdisciplinary methodology that “is disobedient (rogue, rebellious, black)” (44). At every level of form, McKittrick’s stories (presented in columns, footnotes, lists, photographs, dances, or songs) are acts of rebellion. Notably, the book is not divided into numbered chapters, and the stories can be read in any order. Instead, *Dear Science* reverberates and resonates as “waveforms”—nonlinear, not teleological, not eschatological, not rigid, not fixed. Each connected story “exceeds all efforts to definitively pin it down”—purposefully evading description, categorization, systematization, and summation (71).

To engage with *Dear Science* is to fall in love with the world-making words of Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, and Frantz Fanon all over again. Wynter and McKittrick remind us that we are a “storytelling species” (9) who are steeped in, and struggle through, language—telling ourselves (and each other) stories in order to survive and make sense of the world around us. *Dear Science* narrates *different* stories about Black method and methodology, science, algorithms, music, geography, Black studies, liberation, friendships, collaboration, joy, memories, and Black livingness. Put another way, with *Dear Science*, McKittrick is “bringing human invention into existence”—«le véritable saut»¹ (“the real leap”) that Fanon indexes (57).

Following Glissant’s notions of “errantry and relation and opacity,” as readers we reoriented ourselves with/in the text—with the story titles and subtitles serving as signposts (32). If, as McKittrick instructs, to “read creative texts as theoretical texts,” her work enables the reader to wonder and wander (119). Our curiosity leads us back to her second story, “Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor),” which exemplifies her rebellious, story-sharing, collaborative praxis. McKittrick writes, listens, and feels in communion with other creatives. We noticed that the footnotes exceeded the main text, then realized that the whole story is a footnote that leaves irreducible traces of Black life, world-making, and theorizing scattered across geographic space and time.

Oscillating back and forth between different stories, readers are re/introduced to work of M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Toni Morrison, W. E. B. Du Bois, Drexciya, Betty Davis, and many more. Returning to the main text, readers learn lessons from Wynter and McKittrick about our “present order of knowledge” (163) as “self-replicating” (23). Specifically, they learn that “radical theory-making takes place outside existing systems of knowledge and that this place, outside (demonic grounds), is inhabited by those who are brilliantly and intimately aware of existing systems of knowledge” (23). This process is conceptually rigorous, exhaustive, and heavy. As McKittrick demonstrates, “Citing is not easy. Referencing is hard” (17). McKittrick compels readers to ask more generative epistemological questions (how we know what we know) and rethink “*where* we know from” (107). As we were writing this review, we listened to Betty Davis’s “They Say I’m Different” in the background (see the photograph on page 94, the playlist on page 122, and footnote 8 on page 16). We sat with metaphor, citations, and sites of possibility; and we were reminded how “the ideas we share, the counsel we give each other—is an ongoing referential conversation about black humanity” (33).

From a “black sense of place” as a methodology attentive to relationality, McKittrick brings her readers where quantitative data and positivist mappings cannot. For instance, McKittrick’s story about writing an entry on “diaspora” for the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* is instructive. We observed how the discipline’s colonial authority—

whereby space is “knowable” and “transparent”—is reified (180). Rather than cataloguing, making lists, and drawing maps in normative ways, we were once again invited to think outside of our present geographic order of knowledge that is underwritten by a “biocentrally induced accumulation by dispossession” (3, 74). Put differently, McKittrick’s “project of disavowal” is not about disciplining or institutionalizing diaspora in a fixed way (180). Instead, she posits that “diaspora geography” is “the act of sharing ideas about where liberation is and might be” (182). Throughout the book, McKittrick repeatedly illustrates how: “Description is not liberation” (39, 44, 45, 128). As a conceptual frame, Black studies engages in the ongoing “intellectual struggle” of seeking out liberation and aesthetically enacting what Wynter and McKittrick refer to as “being human as praxis” (70, 159).

McKittrick’s *Dear Science* is generous and expansive—disrupting normative disciplinary approaches often rehearsed in academic writing. It demands careful engagement and deep study. Whenever readers feel that they have a firm “grasp” on an idea, a place, or way of being, McKittrick unsettles the theoretical grounds beneath us. For “readers *from elsewhere*” who “want [and need] to understand everything,” *Dear Science* is a profoundly destabilizing and disorientating experience (in the best sense of the word) (171). By this we mean that we need to rethink what we cannot know and cannot have. Reading this book will, borrowing from Fanon, cause your heart to make your head swim («Le coeur me tourne la tête»²) (1).

Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 186. ↩

2. Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, 113. ↩

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Jade How completed her MA in the Individualized Program (INDI) at Concordia University. Her interdisciplinary project interrogates the relationship between race, place, and space and adds to the existing canon on women of color as the theoreticians of their own lives.

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